

Full Text of President Paula-Mae Weekes' maiden speech.



President Paulla-Mae Weekes, the sixth president of the Republic of TT.

INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF HER EXCELLENCY THE SIXTH PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

DELIVERED ON MARCH 19, 2018 AT THE QUEEN'S PARK SAVANNAH, PORT OF SPAIN

Fellow citizens from the least among you to the greatest and other distinguished guests.

Well before the date of assumption of any new position the candidate had better be clear about the job description, with that in mind I first looked at the Constitution and while it outlined certain duties and functions of president, the office holder's role was not defined. Then aided by memory, anecdote and available material I analysed the leadership and decision-making styles of my predecessors in office. This unscientific research led me to the conclusion that it falls to each President to define within prescribed limits his or in this case her own role. After much deliberation I identified my role as "humble first servant" with the mandate to render service with enthusiasm.

As I continued thinking about how I - as President and we - as a nation would navigate the course ahead, I remembered that many years ago after completing several marathons I was looking through a Runner's World magazine and saw an article by one of USA's foremost authorities on long distance running. He opined that the ideal weight for a female marathoner was 95 to 100 lbs. I haven't stopped laughing yet, since at my lightest I was at least twice that and then on more serious reflection I thought, what if I had had this information before undertaking that challenge? Would I have allowed it to stop me? If I had, I would not have stretched myself beyond my then known limits, nor made wonderful friends. I would not have undertaken wild adventures such as attempting to climb a mountain with a name that

begins Kill-a-man and perhaps most importantly I would not today be able to look back on that period, which was not without its hurdles - literal and figurative, with a sense of satisfaction, pride and accomplishment. Could this apply to us today? I say "us" because I consider that for the period of my tenure, our destinies mine and that of our nation are inextricably linked.

Many experts real and armchair, in positions high and low, "beset us round with dismal stories" they tell us that T&T is perilously close to the point of no return - crime, corruption, racism, abysmal public services and an ineffective judicial system, among other problems are so thick on the ground that all hope is lost; that we will soon be, if we are not already there, a failed state, however defined. So how do we respond to these commentators and to our reality? What are we to do?

As I see it we have but 2 choices....Option 1 - We can lament, blame, criticise and allow a miasma of despair to overwhelm us or Option 2 we can consciously and intentionally choose the alternative. Not wish for - or dream about - or only hope and pray for the alternative, but make up a hard mind and mobilise forces and resources to step out boldly and make TT a better place for us and our children all the while understanding that though faith is a necessity, without action it is useless.

Let me confess up front to sharing certain characteristics with Pollyanna - that storybook character filled with irrepressible optimism and a tendency to find good in everything - but I do not now nor have I ever lived in an ivory tower nor worn blinkers. I may have had some advantages that others have not, but having lived in Trinidad & Tobago all my life, I have endured the maddening inefficiencies of the public sector, I too drive with my windows up and doors locked even in broad daylight, I have lost two cars to thieves, and waited hours for medical attention for a relative at POSGH.

I know what the murder count is and how many of the victims have been women and children slaughtered in acts of domestic violence, I am cognizant of the volatile tensions in east Port of Spain. I see people affected by mental illness, addiction and homelessness sleeping on the streets and if I needed to get to Tobago in a hurry I could not be certain if or when I would arrive. I comprehend fully the state of the state and so understand why we might have every reason to despair.

None of us is blind or foolish enough to deny that Trinidad and Tobago is going through dark times, but I echo the words of C.S. Lewis when I say -"this a good world gone wrong but it still retains the memory of what ought to have been" So, here comes the Pollyanna in me now - it is my mission, mission entirely possible, to infect each and every one of you with a bright and positive spirit as we strive to turn our beloved nation into what it ought to have been and still can be.

So let us today choose Option 2 confront the darkness and declare that it will not take over. It is a tenet of most major religions that light triumphs over darkness. Our Hindu community expresses the most visible manifestation with rows of deyas shining on the darkest night to symbolize the triumph of good over evil, of light over darkness. Even the humanists among us, who are of the school of philosophy that believes in human effort and ingenuity rather than religion, will agree that light is best seen in the dark and that it is always darkest just before the dawn.

Light always serves a purpose, it directs ships to safe harbour, it illuminates our path, it can lead the way, it purifies, it exposes hidden dangers, promotes clear vision and if legend is to be believed it even repels, vampires, goblins and foul fiends that try to daunt the spirit.

What I am saying is not novel at all but as a wise man once said “people need to be reminded more often than they need to be instructed”.

Our challenge then is to be light and see light. I use the word challenge deliberately because this mission is not for the fainthearted. If I might loosely borrow some words from the Bard of Avon in Henry V we will need to

“Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood...

...set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,

Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit

To his full height.....

This will not be accomplished easily or overnight. It is a marathon folks! Whether we set off with a burst of speed or at a crawl there will come periods in which we fade and have to employ the “just to the next lamppost” strategy as we soldier on. But there will also be unexpected surges of energy when we are able to propel ourselves forward with extraordinary vigour. We must not become weary. We must trust that in time we will reap the benefits of our efforts.

Being a light does not necessitate grand schemes or accomplishments. A flickering candle can be as effective as a blazing bushfire in the right environment. Be a light in your home, instill discipline, model good behaviour, practise punctuality, honesty and politeness, or in your school, pay more attention to the lesson than to your phone, protect the vulnerable, respect those in authority, be a light in your community, care for your environment, be tolerant of views, beliefs and practices of others, re-imagine and re-engineer the village that it takes to raise today’s’ children, you can be a light in your workplace, get to work on time, actually do work while you are there and go the extra mile if need be.

On a larger scale you can be a light in your nation. For that we will have to put country first - Before self, family, party, tribe. Let’s not fool ourselves, at times this will take serious sacrifice. This is the work of patriots. Love for our twin islands has to be planted, nurtured and buttressed day after day after day and the seed must be sown in early childhood. I am always amazed at the way many of us behave as if the national anthem is for our entertainment rather than an opportunity to express afresh our national identity. We don’t sing and then at the end we applaud. We do not rehearse often enough the nation-building lyrics of God Bless Our Nation and Our Nation’s Dawning. Don’t underestimate the value of knowing and regularly repeating those inspirational and aspirational words.

Let us not miss the relevance and timeliness of one of our nationals, Len Peters, being awarded in February this year the first Commonwealth Points of Light Award for exceptional voluntary service in protecting endangered turtle species. Recognise too, Gabrielle Branche who won an award from the United World Colleges for an innovative project targeting secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. She is reported to have said that if she could do

her part to change the mind-sets of everyone towards the environment and encourage others to continue in this vein she would have made a difference.

Be inspired by Len, Gabrielle and others to be and to look for points of light. Sometimes that light will be straight ahead, glaring and obvious; at other times we might need to employ peripheral vision and a pair of binoculars, but fear not, it is always present. Even in the midst of the relentless assault on our sensibilities as individuals and as a nation, every day we can find shining examples of all that is good about us. Search them out, encourage and support them in order to spread the glow.

Friends, Trinbagonians, Countrymen, I have listened carefully to all that you have said following my election. Your high expectations indicate to me that there is a mustard seed of faith that things can get better in our twin-island republic - and if I read that right - all things, good things are possible for Trinidad and Tobago.

As your servant, my promise is that I will work tirelessly, (I'll labour night and day) to do my best by word and deed both to be a light and spread the light of others at every opportunity. But if you feel that you are going to leave me alone to do all the heavy lifting, you're sadly mistaken. I have something to ask of you...No, I'm not asking for a honeymoon period: I well understand that your reservoir of patience with holders of high office has all but run dry. But I am going to rub my imaginary lamp and appeal to the collective genie that you are...Here are my three wishes...

First of all I ask you to find ways to make a positive difference in whatever your sphere of influence, not necessarily ambitious designs but rather specific, practical, doable projects - the results of which can be seen and measured in the short term, and then let us celebrate each success. Many individuals and organisations have asked to meet with me. Let's not meet just for meeting sake ... we do not have that luxury. Come armed with your ideas, your feasible projects to improve our quality of life. Nothing will catch my attention faster than a man or woman with a plan.

Next, I ask those of you with a platform from which to disseminate your views to find new and creative ways to inspire your audience while reporting responsibly and commenting civilly on the facts and in particular on social media which is here to stay and has great value in giving a voice to those who might otherwise be voiceless but reckless use of this or any communication channel will defeat its very purpose. Is it at all possible to dial down the rhetoric while still adding your 2 cents' worth to the discussion on any issue?

And last, and before I run out of goodwill, we speak all the time about how violent a society we've become ... true, but the climate of violence is not created or even birthed in overt acts, it's embedded in everyday talk, in commonplace interaction... in schools, in the market, in business places, in the rum shop, and worst of all in the home. I ask you to be mindful in your use of language remembering that a soft answer often turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger and that pleasant speech increases one's persuasiveness. When we have the inevitable differences of opinion we can do so without the savagery, the ad hominem attacks, the gratuitous insults.

In closing, I thank God for his mercies ... for me the boundary lines have fallen in pleasant places, I have a goodly heritage.

I thank the electoral college for its vote of confidence in me. I hope that the unanimity achieved on that occasion will be experienced again and again for the good of country.

I thank former President Carmona for his service to the nation and for his consideration and kindness to me in the lead up to his hosting today's inauguration. I have known him since the late 70s when as fellow campus calypsonians he was the Prophet of Sisyphus and I Brickhouse, so I expected no less.

I thank my mother, family and friends for their unstinting support and regular reality checks. If I ever get too big for my britches I am sure they'll cut me down to size. They keep me humble and grounded.

And most of all I thank you the people of T&T for your good wishes and prayers as I undertake this awesome responsibility do not let me walk alone. By faith let us stand and then go forward side by side as we carry our nation to greatness.